***YouTube Celebrity Culture- YouTuber/Fan Relationships.***

I will be looking at Producer/Audience relationships within the context of YouTube and YouTube Celebrities. The corner of YouTube I’m focussing on here is the videoblogging or vlogging content creators. The vloggers I will be looking at have become not just YouTube Celebrities, but celebrities outright. Some begun vlogging in their bedrooms as teenagers and have built up a loyal following over time, others have started out in the last couple of years jumping on the bandwagon of promised YouTube fame and YouTube money. The vlogs themselves contain makeup tutorials, direct to camera diary style entries, advice on how to get a boy or girlfriend, hand held travel diaries, funny challenges, collaborations with other vloggers; all mostly aimed at teenagers. These vloggers have millions of subscribers, and through the YouTube partnership program, they are earning money from advertisements and views, enough money to quit their jobs or drop out of uni. This success experienced by hundreds of YouTubers, or Vloggers, still only accounts for a handful of the site’s users. These celebrities are adored by their teenage fans, but the divide between the two parties is comparatively small compared to the celebrity crushes of the past, with the possibility of contact through social media. If you’re a fan of Alfie Deyes you can comment on his videos, post a video response, tweet him, message him on Facebook, and he can do the same back. However, there is now a very visible hierarchy between creators and viewers in the YouTube community. In the oft talked about “good old days” YouTube fitted into the framework of participatory culture perfectly. In a post on “How YouTube Became OurTube” on his blog, Henry Jenkins discusses this:

“All of this is a vivid illustration of what I’ve described elsewhere as “participatory culture.” In a participatory culture, there are relatively low barriers for engagement and participation, there is strong support for sharing your creations with others, there is a system of informal mentorship where experienced participants help train newbies, and there is a sense that others care about what you say and create. Each of the subcultures represented here have some if not all of the properties of a participatory culture, and when YouTube provides a home for these communities, it acquires some of those properties as well, though it is less clear whether anyone has a primary identification with YouTube and it is very clear that in some ways YouTube itself (especially in its comments sections) can be hostile to the diversity that a participatory culture needs to thrive.” (http://henryjenkins.org/?s=youtube#sthash.aiU2M2qT.dpuf)

It is certainly clear now that many fans have a primary identification with YouTube, especially in its current celebrity filled form. In the good old days members of the community were both viewers and creators, it was a sharing environment, where anyone could take control of their message and “broadcast themselves.” YouTubers would arrange meet ups in parks or cafes and whether you had 100 subscribers or 100, 000, there was a community environment, where tips and tricks could be shared, and admiration shown. Many YouTube creators used their own lives as the content for their channels. This could be sharing stories or singing songs from their bedrooms or taking the camera out with them in their daily lives. It was quite a “nerdy” space, where teenagers who didn’t quite fit in at school had a place to be themselves. Some of the most popular British YouTubers of about 5 years ago were part of the Trock, Timelord Rock movement, writing songs about Doctor Who. Wizard Rock too flourished on YouTube, with Hank Green’s ‘Accio Deathly Hallows’ bringing his vlogbrothers channel many new viewers from the Harry Potter fandom. Communities were formed and connected. With Nerdfighters using this as power for good through so many successful charity drives. Viewers were exposed to quite intimate details of the lives of these creators and thus felt a connection and continued watching. Now however, the celebrity vlogger community seems to have taken over, which is most apparent at the YouTube conventions, where their enthusiastic fans wait for hours just for the chance of a few minutes of meet and greet. YouTuber BriBry laments, “I miss the day when Youtube was full of 'nerdy' creative people that didn't fit in anywhere else. Now its full of the popular kids at school.”

Vlogging has become a lucrative career for many young people, who have now amassed thousands or even millions of viewers. The ‘meet ups’ of days past have now been replaced with thousands strong conventions where barriers literally divide the (often screaming, young and female) viewers from the creators. The balance of power has clearly shifted in the YouTube world and this could be causing serious damage to the community. The newfound money and fame of Vloggers breaking into mainstream media bringing what Lawrence Lessig calls the “commercial” economy into their “sharing” economy. What used to be a relationship between ‘creator and viewer’ has now certainly become ‘celebrity and fan’. As YouTubers sign contracts with ‘social talent management’ companies and endorse products, they find themselves suddenly in positions of wealth, power and influence over their vast young audiences, who in turn can now no longer easily relate to their jet-setting lifestyles.

**Scandal**

The scandals that have hit the YouTube vlogging community this year seem to be a symptom of this blurring relationship. I found myself glued, more so than usual, to Tumblr earlier this year as revelations began to pour forth from several young female YouTube fans who had, over the last few years, experienced abuse at the hands of a handful of prominent male YouTubers. There’s a frighteningly long list of accused and even more frighteningly long list of accusers. The stories ranged from coercion to underage relationships with older males, taking place at YouTube events or private meetups. Many of whom were part of the “‘nerdy’ creative” good old days, with both Trockers and Wrockers involved.

A great thing about this community is that discussion can happen instantaneously; overnight there were blog posts from YouTubers and viewers which were reblogged and shared around, discussions held on twitter were screenshotted and shared on Tumblr, by the next day there were video responses and vlogs reacting to the news, furthering the discussion and attempting to make sense of and dissect what was happening within the community.

A good thing came out of a terrible situation. The YouTube vlogging community showed its participatory nature and a constructive discussion seems to still be happening. But as the landscape of YouTube has evolved, the divide between viewers and creators has grown and it has become important now to define this line. The relationship has seemed intimate, but ultimately one-sided. The scenes of the good old days have now been mostly replaced with fans behind the barriers screaming and crying for the vloggers as they make their way to the backstage VIP areas. As creators have gained more viewers, joined the YouTube partnership programme, begun to earn money from their channels, the everyday life that drew viewers in, becomes YouTube celebrity life. Now that the audiences have grown so rapidly and with management companies to keep an eye on the talent, perhaps it is safer for both parties behind the barriers, more so than in the more care free good old days.

<<Alfie Book Signing- clip>>

Alfie is mobbed, in apocalyptic scenes here. “You guys are crazy” he repeats. Zoe is so overwhelmed that she is crying, all the while still pointing her own camera in her face. This seems to be the line where content is becoming reality TV, where the element of aspiration comes in and where dreams of becoming ‘YouTube Famous’ come in. Where at one point, a teenage viewer might watch and relate to vloggers with a life not dissimilar to their own, in the space where they could be their “nerdy” self, and aspire to make fun and entertaining videos just like them. Now a teenage viewer is more likely to aspire to make fun and entertaining videos just like them, but with the aim of making YouTube dollars, buying a cool flat to host fellow YouTubers in, appear in magazines, sign a book deal, and get mobbed in the street everywhere they go. This is not to say that aspiring to be successful is a bad thing for young people to take part in, but there is a definite difference between wanting to be part of a community full of people just like you and wanting to get in on the big bucks and join the gang backstage in the VIP room.

No matter how many cries of “I’m just a normal person” come from Zoella or SprinkleofGlitter, there is no way I can relate to them in the same way I could 3 years ago when SprinkleofGlitter vlogged about thrifty ways to shop and how strapped for cash her young family was. Endless meals out, taxi rides, whole new wardrobes bought, flights around the world, front row seats at fashion week, magazine photo shoots- this is celebrity behaviour. Of course growth has to happen, but I think it is undeniable that YouTube is a very different place from the community of “the good old days.”

**Commercial/Sharing Economy**

Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green in Spreadable Media (2013) discuss the differing value systems in Web 2.0, where on one side we have the large mass media corporations who consider monetary value the driving force and on the other the grass roots collective intelligence who see the worth of creations in non-monetary terms (Jenkins, Ford, Green, 2013, 55). Lawrence Lessig calls the grassroots side the “sharing” economy and the other the “commercial” economy. Lewis Hyde calls them “commodity culture” and “gift economy”., where commodity has a “value” and gift has a “worth”. The two are very much entwined at YouTube with such a big emphasis on copyright software for large media companies to keep control of their property. The “Partner Program” at YouTube brings the commercial side to “ordinary” users, promising them advertising revenue on their original content. It is the partner program that has created so many opportunities in the vlogging community, for vloggers to make creating YouYube content, their full time job. The nature of vlogging means that this change is very visible to the audience. The video quality goes up as vloggers buy better cameras and lights and spend time learning to use better editing software. They jet off on more holidays, go out for more meals, get bigger flats and more expensive clothes. Notions of value and worth become intertwined, as for example Alfie only gets paid if his content reaches a wide enough audience. The Value of Alfie’s work is determined by the Worth placed on it by his audience. Jenkins et al write,

“The millions of individuals producing videos for YouTube take pride in their accomplishments, quite apart from their production of value for a company. They create media texts because they have something they want to share with a larger audience... This process... always involves some degree of “self-branding,” which can make the participants complicit in the systems of values through which commercial companies appraise their material. Users generating online content are often interested in expanding their own audience and reputation. They may measure their success by how many followers they attract on Twitter, just as television executives value the number of eyeballs their programs attract” (Jenkins et al, 2013, 59).

So while a YouTuber might measure their success in numbers of subscribers and followers on social media with these numbers representing their expanding audience and growing reputations, they become a “self-branded” product, which is worth more, the higher these numbers are. However when faced with their audience in human form, rather than number form, these vloggers become uncomfortable with their new celebrity status, and it has become very easy for them to see their fans as just one excited screaming mob, rather than individual viewers who have an intimate experience of one to one interaction when watching their vlogs.

**Imagine Complexly**

There is a bit of unease that has come about from this deepening divide between the YouTube celebrities and their fans. Both sides feel misunderstood. The term “imagine complexly” has been used by both with, viewers asking to be seen as individuals, more than part of a screaming mob and creators being asked to be taken down from pedestals. The nature of YouTube has allowed for this open discussion to take place.

Louise, aka Sprinkle of Glitter posted a video about YouTube Celebrity Culture, where she, as a popular YouTuber who gets mobbed at conventions, addresses a few of her concerns mostly regarding her fans’ relationship to her. She calls for her viewers not to idolise her or think she’s perfect. She asks viewers to instead look to women from history who she thinks would be better up on that pedestal.

*<<Don’t Idolise Me- Clip>>*

In response to this, in other vlogs and in the comments, viewers have replied that they should be able to choose who they admire and idolise. Look at the language Louise has used here, describer herself as some women who sits in her room and makes videos, don’t idolise that, idolise a female figure from history or science, she says, they are worth looking up to. What Louise has perhaps missed here is that, her predominantly young, female audience, look at Louise as a current and relevant role model for their lives. Women in history and science are of course to be admired, but they haven’t spoken directly through a YouTube video to their audiences about how to deal with body image issues and given dating advice and entertained them. Of course they don’t know Louise when the camera is off, but they probably do feel they know SprinkleofGlitter pretty well, and what they do know, they greatly admire. Perhaps Louise is finding it hard to understand just how important this form of entertainment media is for the generation of fans who watch her videos.

Louise goes on to describe her experience at a recent YouTube convention where she felt “overwhelmed” by her fans, screaming at her and mobbing her.

*<<ViewersScareMe- Clip>>*

She says, “We all just started as the same, and I feel like we are all still the same and then things happen like people screaming at you and barriers and security...” And clearly here she is expressing how very uncomfortable she is with her new found fame. The fact that she uses the word “scare” is very emotive. She admits she hasn’t quite got her thoughts together yet and invites viewers to continue the discussion. If her viewers are determining the worth of her videos and therefore the value, and her value as a creator, then surely she has a lot to owe them, at least in respect. Charlie, of charlieissocoollike, joined the conversation too, with a video called Respecting Your Audience. He hits on this point, that the blame for this growing divide is being put on the “crazy fans” and not on the celebrities themselves.

*<<Respecting Your Audience- Clip>>*

So, what does it mean to “Imagine Complexly” as has been the term used on both “sides” of this divide. It seems to just mean to remember that each creator and each viewer are all individual people with their own human faults and flaws. You can hardly blame fans of Alfie or Zoe or Louise for feeling like they do know them, when the camera is their hand everyday filming themselves crying, laughing, eating. It is reality TV content that they are creating, but I guess the important thing to remember is that while it is not edited a certain way by a production company or TV channel, this content is still self-edited, and it is still projecting a certain view of the “perfect” them. The creators, or celebrities, perhaps need to take some responsibility for this content, and understand that their viewers, or fans, are going to take this edited version of self as the real thing, because they are not watching TV, they are interacting in the much more intimate space that is YouTube.

**Grassroots YouTube?**

The area of YouTube celebrity I have been exploring is definitely only a tiny part of the whole landscape of YouTube. Even in the vlogging community, there are more than just the celebs. YouTube still holds power, and while it has become a new machine for creating celebrities, the grassroots “nerdy” community still exists within it. Mid-level creators still exist building small niche communities around them and interacting with viewers and other creators as had happened before, in the “good old days”. The communities built around other fan objects, like those for Harry Potter and Wizard Rock, are still there. The vlogs of these YouTubers at the big conventions shows them having quite a normal convention experience. Meeting internet friends in real life, stopping to talk to the odd viewer, visiting merch stands and forging new friendships without having to hide in the VIP backstage area and get taxied around in golf carts to avoid being mobbed by fans. It is this part of YouTube that needs to continue to be nurtured. The vlogging part of YouTube has shown itself to be active and engaged especially when some kind of scandal occurs, which actually brings both sides of the divide closer together. The community has shown itself to be active and ready to engage in discourse to make it a safer and more united space. Numerous videos on consent sprung up after the scandals earlier this year and the call to arms in response to Sam Pepper’s prank videos earlier this week, shows how capable this community really is in respecting each other and learning from its mistakes. It is also fairly unforgiving when it comes to this kind of scandal, with all those deemed guilty by the community not welcome at any future events and any future content they publish mostly met with distain. The “nerdy” grassroots part of YouTube, which still seems to fit with Jenkins’ ideas of participatory culture, is what I see as bridging the gap between the YouTube fans and the YouTube celebrities. It has a voice, often a voice of reason, which helps keep the community honest and open. It is this community that is important, as Caroline Siede writes in an article for AV Club, “YouTube stars create communities, not fans.”